

**The Crack-Up**  
by F. Scott Fitzgerald  
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Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work – the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside – the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within – that you don’t feel until it’s too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick – the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

Before I go on with this short history, let me make a general observation – the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise. This philosophy fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the “impossible,” come true. Life was something you dominated if you were any good. Life yielded easily to intelligence and effort, or to what proportion could be mustered of both. It seemed a romantic business to be a successful literary man – you were not ever going to be as famous as a movie star but what note you had was probably longer-lived – you were never going to have the power of a man of strong political or religious convictions but you were certainly more independent. Of course within the practice of your trade you were forever unsatisfied-but I, for one, would not have chosen any other.

As the twenties passed, with my own twenties marching a little ahead of them, my two juvenile regrets – at not being big enough (or good enough) to play football in college, and at not getting overseas during the war – resolved themselves into childish waking dreams of imaginary heroism that were good enough to go to sleep on in restless nights. The big problems of life seemed to solve themselves, and if the business of fixing them was difficult, it made one too tired to think of more general problems.

Life, 10 years ago, was largely a personal matter. I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to “succeed” – and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. If I could do this through the common ills – domestic, professional and personal – then the ego would continue as an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last.

For seventeen years, with a year of deliberate loafing and resting out in the center – things went on like that, with a new chore only a nice prospect for the next day. I was living hard, too, but: “Up to forty-nine it’ll be all right,” I said. “I can count on that. For a man who’s lived as I have, that’s all you could ask.”

And then, ten years this side of forty-nine, I suddenly realized that I had prematurely cracked.

Now a man can crack in many ways – can crack in the head – in which case the power of decision is taken from you by others! or in the body, when one can but submit to the white hospital world; or in the nerves. William Seabrook in an unsympathetic book tells, with some pride and a movie ending, of how he became public charge. What led to his alcoholism or was bound up with it, was a collapse of his nervous system. Though the present writer was not so entangled – having at the time not tasted so much as a glass of beer for six months – it was his nervous reflexes that were giving way – too much anger and too many tears.

Moreover, to go back to my thesis that life has a varying offensive, the realization of having cracked was not simultaneous with a blow, but with a reprieve.

Not long before, I had sat in the office of a great doctor and listened to a grave sentence. With what, in retrospect, seems some equanimity, I had gone on about my affairs in the city where I was living, not caring much, not thinking how much had been left undone, or what would become of this and that responsibility, like people do in books; I was well insured and anyhow I had been only a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, even of my talent.

But I had a strong sudden instinct that I must be alone. I didn’t want to see any people at all. I had seen so many people all my life – I was an average mixer, but more than average in a tendency to identify myself, my ideas, my destiny, with those of all classes that I came in contact with. I was always saving or being saved – in a single morning I would go through the emotions ascribable to Wellington at Waterloo. I lived in a world of inscrutable hostiles and inalienable friends and supporters.

But now I wanted to be absolutely alone and so arranged as certain insulation from ordinary cares.

It was not an unhappy time. I went away and there were fewer people. I found I was good-and-tired. I could lie around and was glad to, sleeping or dozing sometimes twenty hours a day and in the intervals trying resolutely not to think – instead I made lists – made lists and tore them up, hundreds of lists: of cavalry leaders and football players and cities, and popular tunes and pitchers, and happy times, and hobbies and houses lived in a how many suits since I left the army and how many pairs of shoes (I didn’t count the suit I bought in Sorrento that shrunk, nor the pumps and dress shirt and collar that I carried around for years and never wore, because the pumps got damp and grainy and the shirt and collar got yellow and starch-rotted). And lists of women I’d liked, and of the times I had let myself be snubbed by people who had not been my betters in character or ability.

- And then suddenly, surprisingly, I got better.

- And cracked like an old plate as soon as I heard the news.

That is the real end of the story. What was to be done about it will have to rest in what used to be called the “womb of time.” Suffice it to say that after about an hour of solitary pillow-hugging, I began to realize that for two years my life had been a drawing on resources that I did not possess, that I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt. What was the small gift of life given back in comparison to that? – when there had once been a pride of direction and a confidence in enduring independence.

I realized that in those two years, in order to preserve something – an inner hush maybe, maybe not-I had weaned myself from all the things I used to love – that every act of life from the morning tooth-brush to the friend at dinner had become an effort. I saw that for a long time I had not liked people and things, but only followed the rickety old pretense of liking, I saw that even my love for those closest to me was become only an attempt to love, that my casual relations – with an editor, a tobacco seller, the child of a friend, were only what I remembered I should do, from other days. All in the same month I became bitter about such things as the sound of the radio, the advertisements in the magazines, the screech tracks, the dead silence of the country – contemptuous at human softness, immediately (if secretively) quarrelsome toward hardness – hating the night when I couldn’t sleep and hating the day because it went toward night. I slept on the heart side now because I knew that the sooner I could tire that out, even a little, the sooner would come that blessed hour of nightmare which, like a catharsis, would enable me to better meet the new day.

There were certain spots, certain faces I could look at. Like most Middle Westerners, I have never had any but the vaguest race prejudices – I had always had a secret yen for the lovely Scandinavian blondes who sat on porches in St. Paul but hadn’t emerged enough economically to be part of what was then society. They were too nice to be “chickens” and too quickly off the farmlands to seize a place in the sun, but I remember going round blocks to catch a single glimpse of shining hair – the bright shock of a girl I’d never know. This is urban, unpopular talk. It strays afield from the fact that in these latter days I couldn’t stand the sight of Celts, English, Politicians, Strangers, Virginians, Negroes (light or dark), Hunting People, or retail clerks, and middlemen in general, all writers (I avoided writers very carefully because they can perpetuate trouble as no one else can) – and all the classes as classes and most of them as members of their class…

Trying to cling to something, I liked doctors and girl children up to the age of about thirteen and well-brought-up boy children from about eight years old on. I could have peace and happiness with these few categories of people. I forgot to add that I liked old men – men over 70, sometimes over 60 if their faces looked seasoned. I liked Katherine Hepburn’s face on the screen, no matter what was said about her pretentiousness, and Miriam Hopkins’ face, and old friends if I only saw them once a year and could remember their ghosts.

All rather inhuman and undernourished, isn’t it? Well, that, children, is the true sign of cracking up.

It is not a pretty picture. Inevitably it was carted here and there within its frame and exposed to various critics. One of them can only be described as a person whose life makes other people’s lives seem like death – even this time when she was cast in the usually unappealing role of Job’s comforter. In spite of the fact that this story is over let me append our conversation as a sort of postscript:

“Instead of being so sorry for yourself, listen -” she said. (She always says “Listen,” because she thinks while she talks – really thinks.) So she said: Listen. Suppose this wasn’t a crack in you – suppose it was a crack in the Grand Canyon.”

“The crack’s in me,” I said heroically.

“Listen! The world only exists in your eyes – your conception of it. You can make it as big or as small as you want to. And you’re trying to be a little puny individual. By God, if I ever cracked, I’d try to make the world crack with me. Listen! The world only exists through your apprehension of it, and so it’s much better to say that it’s not you that’s cracked – it’s the Grand Canyon.”

“Baby et up all her Spinoza?”

“I don’t know anything about Spinoza. I know – ” She spoke, then, of old woes of her own, that seemed, in the telling, to have been more dolorous than mine, and how she had met them, over-ridden them, beaten them.

I felt a certain reaction to what she said, but I am a slow-thinking man, and it occurred to me simultaneously that of all natural forces, vitality is the incommunicable one. In days when juice came into one as an article without duty, one tried to distribute it – but always without success; to further mix metaphors, vitality never “takes.” You have it or you haven’t it, like health or brown eyes or honor or a baritone voice. I might have asked some of it from her, neatly wrapped and ready for home cooking and digestion, but I could never have got it – not if I’d waited around for a thousand hours with the tin cup of self-pity. I could walk from her door, holding myself carefully like cracked crockery, and go away into the world of bitterness, where I was making a home with such materials as are found there – and quote to myself after I left her door:

“Ye are the salt of the earth. But if the salt hath lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?” Matthew 5-13.